

New Health Star Rating nutrition label may not be best format

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University of Otago researchers are questioning the likely effectiveness of new Health Star Rating nutrition labels that may soon be seen on the front of food packages in New Zealand and Australia.

While interpretive [nutrition labels](#) are an improvement on the current Nutrition Information Panel, a recent study suggests the Health Star Rating label may not be the best option for consumers.

University of Otago researcher Dr Ninia Maubach led a study that compared three front-of-pack nutrition labels –Star Ratings, Daily Intake Guides, and Multiple Traffic Light labels – as well as the back-of-pack Nutrition Information Panel. The research examined consumers' preferences for fruit mueslis with different nutritional profiles in an experiment completed by over 750 New Zealanders last year.

The results show that although consumers made similar choices towards the healthiest muesli option when it featured either the Star Rating or Multiple Traffic Light labels, the Multiple Traffic Light label better helped consumers identify and avoid less healthy mueslis. Participants also rated the healthiness of the options tested, and were significantly better able to differentiate between their nutrition profiles when these featured colour-coded traffic lights.

"These findings show most people can identify healthy products with either the stars or traffic light labels. However a traffic light label appears much more likely to help people distinguish less healthy choices.

If we want to use labels to reduce obesity, we need a label that promotes quick identification of unhealthy products," said Dr Maubach.

The newly proposed Health Star Rating (HSR) label was developed by representatives from the Australian food and beverage industries, Government, health and consumer agencies. It is similar to the star label format tested in this study, which was designed following guidelines proposed by a New Zealand working group in November 2012.

These star rating labels' origins lie in the previous Australian government's decision to reject traffic light labelling, circumstances described by Dr Maubach as deeply ironic: "Politicians rejected an expert panel's recommendation to support the Multiple Traffic Light format on grounds of insufficient evidence, despite many published studies demonstrating its effectiveness, yet there is no peer-reviewed research into this new format."

The initial HSR proposal faced stern criticism from the Australian Food and Grocery Council for 'failing to accommodate the AFGC's existing Daily Intake Guide.' The updated guidelines allow for ongoing use of the Daily Intake Guides, which are printed on thousands of products. However, Dr Maubach's study confirms earlier findings that the industry-developed Daily Intake Guide is of no more help to consumers than the existing Nutrition Information Panel.

"The Daily Intake Guide is simply not a helpful format and policy makers need to introduce a label that consumers will find meaningful," says Dr Maubach.

Dr Maubach also calls on the Government to make interpretive front-of-pack nutrition labels mandatory, rather letting companies opt-in.

"A light-touch regulatory approach that relies on voluntary action is not

in consumers' best interests. All packaged foods should feature the same nutrition labels so shoppers have a fair chance to understand foods' nutritional merits."

"A mish-mash of Health Star Ratings, Daily Intake Guides and no labels at all will only exacerbate the confusion we know exists and do little to promote healthier food choices."

Co-researchers include Professor Janet Hoek and Dr Damien Mather, also from Otago's Department of Marketing. The research has been peer reviewed by the international journal *Appetite*, and the article is currently being finalised.

Provided by University of Otago

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